

## THE OBJECTIVE OF ANCIENT ATHENIAN RHETORIC

The major objective of Athenian rhetoric was to prepare members of the middle class (farmers, shopkeepers, and tradespeople) for participation in public debate in competition with the traditional aristocracy of the city . In short, Athenian (and Roman) rhetorics were designed for societies, not unlike our own, where self-promoting individuals wanted advice on how to sway large audiences often composed of ordinary people.

The history of Athens teaches that democracy is linked to that particular form of rhetoric in which citizens are free to address other members of the community who in turn are free to weigh and vote upon competing visions of truth.

In Athens, debate first became important when city-state was formed from tribes who resided in the region. Athenians could not easily rely upon tribal traditions and first families because it was difficult to accommodate competing customs and aristocrats.

In some cases, political positions in Athens were distributed by tribe or by lot; however, to reconcile differences, Athenians more often turned to the practice of debate in the assembly.

In other words, rather than defer absolutely to customs or traditional elders, Athens practiced a democracy of the public meeting in which leaders presented policies to citizens who were able to vote "yes" or "no".

At first participation in debates was restricted to members of the traditional aristocracy, men who were wealthy and maintained fighting equipment. Later, men of the middle class claimed the right to participate in popular assembly. Because citizenship was premised upon military service, women were not included in public meetings of the assembly. Women's rhetorical influence was more indirect on the one hand through conversation, and on the other, through participation in collective festivals and public ritual ceremonies.

Ancient Athenian books of rhetoric offer insight as to how the practice of rhetoric has been linked to the assumption of democratic citizenship. These books teach how, in a republic or democracy, it is possible to attain an ethical balance of personal gain, practical wisdom, and the improvement of society.

That's the theory, but what about the practice? Is it not true that some of the people can be fooled all of the time and all of the people some of the time? Is it not true that speech sometimes smooth the way for bad decisions.? In short, is it not possible that democracy (which makes everyone at least partially responsible for the construction of wisdom) demand too much of human nature? Classical Graeco rhetoric was concerned with the answers to these questions.

Classical rhetoric, with its aim to make people effective in the agora or in the Senate, taught many techniques for gaining influence and for winning people over. This kind of rhetoric was responsive to the desire of a free people to assert their own personal self-interest.

As we are aware, later Latin manuals of rhetoric began to emphasize how to make speeches beautiful rather than persuasive. (Selected Political Speeches of Cicero)

Eventually, with the onset of the imperial system in Rome, the connection of rhetoric to Western democracy was severed. Rhetorics in the West began to focus on literature, courtly behavior, preaching, and the writing of appropriate and beautiful letters. Only when parliamentary democracy began to emerge in Europe in the 1600's was the stage set for renewed attention to rhetoric as an instrument of public debate and decision making.

(J. Michael Sproule, *Speechmaking: Rhetorical Competence in a Postmodern World*)

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## A DEFINITION OF "RHETORIC"?

So we see learn from ancient writings that "rhetoric is responsive to the desire of a free people asserting their own personal self-interest". This leads us into exploring some questions that one might already foresee.

Wayne Booth, a rhetorician, in his text, *The Vocation of a Teacher*, 1988, states that as a teacher of rhetoric:

"My first problem lies of course  
in the very word 'rhetoric'.

Booth suggest, the term "rhetoric" may pose some problems at the outset because of the various meanings it has acquired. For some people "rhetoric" is synonymous with "empty talk" or even "deception". The clichés, "That's mere rhetoric", and "That's just empty rhetoric" are used as insults.

Meanwhile, rhetoric has become an important topic of study in recent years. Its significance to public discussion of important political, social, and even scientific issues has been widely recognized.

Scholars and teachers have expressed great interest in the topic. Many colleges and universities are offering courses in rhetoric, and dozens of books with "rhetoric" in their titles are published every year. Clearly, "rhetoric" arouses mixed feelings. It is both condemned and widely studied; used as an insult and recommended to students as something they should master. What's going on here?

The negative attitude toward rhetoric is not of recent original. Plato calls rhetoric "foul" and "ugly", and as you will learn, Plato was Aristotle's teacher. One of the earliest and most influential discussions of rhetoric, Plato's *Gorgias*, written in the opening decades of the fourth century B. C. when rhetoric was highly popular in Athens, takes a dim view of the practice.

In this dialogue, the character Socrates, apparently representing Plato's own perspective says:

"Rhetoric is simply a means by which naturally clever people flatter their unsuspecting listeners into agreeing with them and doing their bidding."

Rhetoric bashing continues in an almost unbroken tradition from Plato's day to the present. In 1690, the great philosopher, John Locke, advanced a view that had perhaps been influenced by Plato:

"If we speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness; all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats... " (*Essay on Human Understanding*, 1690)

We could continue with other condemnations of "rhetoric", however, opinion about rhetoric has always been divided.

Plato's criticism of rhetoric were themselves answers to someone else's claims about its power and usefulness. and Locke's view often has been answered as well.

Recent writers have reevaluated rhetoric, and they sometimes have come to surprising conclusions.

For example, Wayne Booth wrote just a few years ago that he believed:

"Rhetoric held entire dominion over all verbal pursuits. Logic, dialectic, grammar, philosophy, history, poetry--all are rhetoric." (*The Vocation of a Teacher*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)



Can Booth be talking about the same rhetoric we heard Plato condemn as "foul" and "ugly" or those elements of eloquence Locke referred to as "perfect cheats"? How is it that rhetoric can elicit such sharply opposed judgments about its nature or value?

Almost certainly part of the answer to this question is found in rhetoric's association with persuasion.

I personally take the position that rhetoric is more than persuasion, however, rhetoric traditionally has been concerned with techniques used to gain compliance from other people. This connection with persuasion is likely at the heart of the various attitudes toward rhetoric,

RHETORIC SOMETIMES IS DEFINED BROADLY AS THE PERSUASIVE USE OF LANGUAGE.

This definition would give a person a reason for interest in, and at the same time suspicion of, rhetoric. We all try to persuade at one time or another. Most of us also have had some bad experiences as the object of someone else's persuasive efforts.

Think of the last time you knew you were being persuaded by a telephone solicitor, a religious advocate in an airport, a high-pressure salesperson, a politician, a colleague, or simply a friend or family member.

Something inside you may have resisted the persuasion effort, and you may even have felt some irritation. But you also may have felt you were being drawn in by the appeal, that you were actually being persuaded.

If the person doing the persuading was employing the techniques of rhetoric, you probably think you have a reason to distrust both rhetoric and the people who practice it.

## NOTES FOR THE OPENING LECTURES

From the Introduction of The Rhetoric

This course will address both the philosophy and techniques of rhetoric (the principles)

Not only what to say, but how to say it.

The Rhetoric tells us how to frame a speech.

According to Lane Cooper, "a narrative poem or drama is entirely made up of speeches, in the act of composition, then, the epic or drama, the writer or novelist must constantly use the art of rhetoric"

The judge is the person who the speech is directed (the listener) who approves or disapproves.

A speech is to be judged by its effect upon some one.

(The following is from page XX of The Rhetoric)

"The rhetoric is a study of the human soul. It is a searching study of the audience, or to use Aristotle's frequent term, of the judge, the person or persons to whom your speech is directed

A speech is to be judged by its EFFECT upon someone. Since discourse has its end in persuasion, the speaker or writer must know the nature of the soul he/she wishes to persuade.

That is, they must know human nature, with its ways of reasoning, its habits, desires, and

emotions, and must know the kind of argument that will persuade each kind of individual

as also the emotional appeal that will gain their assent; every detail, the choice of the individual

words and phrases, the arrangement of larger and smaller parts, each single item in the speech is

to be determined by its effect upon the soul. Since every one is alternately listener and speaker, or

reader and writer, the Rhetoric thus becomes a popular treatise on the interest of men in groups

and as individuals, a popular logic, and a popular account of the emotions, the memory, the

imagination in hope and fear, and the will."

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Copy XX of The Rhetoric

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Forensic - law

Epideictic - ceremonial praise or blame

deliberative - persuasive to a course of action or dissuade from it (give advice)

deliberative oratory is public speaking of statesmen